

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 COME-00 EB-08 LAB-04 SIL-01 OMB-01 /070 W
-----230337Z 068771 /20
R 221245Z APR 77
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2890

C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 5793

CALCUTTA 0960 FOLLOWS, SENT TO NEW DELHI FOR ACTION ON 21 APR 77.
BEING RPT FOR YOUR ACTION/INFO.

QUOTE

C O N F I D E N T I A L CALCUTTA 0960

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: ELAB, PINT, IN
SUBJ: LABOR TURMOIL AND POLITICAL AGITATION IN WEST BENGAL

1. IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE LOK SABHA ELECTIONS WEST BENGAL HAD THREE WEEKS OF RELATIVE QUIET WHEN LABOR TROUBLES AND POLITICAL AGITATION WERE ANTICIPATED - AND FEARED - BUT DID NOT MATERIALIZE OR AT LEAST WERE NOT WIDESPREAD. THIS QUIET WAS SHATTERED THIS WEEK ON BOTH FRONTS, WITH LABOR AND POLITICAL AGITATION BOTH INCREASING, THE ONE SPURRING ON THE OTHER IN ANTICIPATION OF THE FALL OF THE STATE'S CONGRESS GOVERNMENT AND THE EARLY CALLING OF LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS.

2. THOUGH THERE HAS BEEN A SIMMERING OF LABOR TROUBLE IN THE CALCUTTA AREA EVER SINCE THE EMERGENCY WAS TERMINATED, THIS WEEK HAS BROUGHT MORE SERIOUS DIFFICULTIES. CALCUTTA AND ITS INDUSTRIAL SUBURBS HAVE BEEN HIT HARD BY POWER
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OUTAGES RESULTING FROM A "GO SLOW" MOVEMENT BY WORKERS OF THE AREA'S POWER PLANTS; NORMAL ACTIVITIES IN THE CITY HAVE BEEN DISRUPTED AND INDUSTRY HAS BEEN WIDELY AFFECTED. CALCUTTA PORT WAS PARALYZED APRIL 20 WHEN BARGEMEN AND LAUNCH STAFF WENT OUT ON STRIKE, THEREBY HALTING THE LOADING AND UNLOADING OF SHIPS. TEACHING STAFF AT CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY WENT OUT IN THE STREET APRIL 20 TO DEMONSTRATE FOR HIGHER

SALARY PAYMENTS BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT WHICH HAD ALREADY BEEN FUNDED BY THE CENTER BUT NOT PAID; 256 DEMONSTRATING PROFESSORS AND LECTURERS WERE ARRESTED - INCLUDING JANATA MP DILIP CHAKRAVARTY - AND TAKEN TO A POLICE STATION, WHERE THEY WERE RELEASED. IN ADDITION ALMOST ALL SENIOR BUSINESS PEOPLE WE KNOW SAY LABOR AGITATION IS INCREASING IN THEIR PLANTS. SOME REPORT GHERAOES, NOTABLY THE DIRECTOR OF THE LARGE CALCUTTA SAXBE WESTINGHOUSE PLANT.

3. BREAD AND BUTTER ISSUES ARE AT STAKE IN ALL THESE STRIKES: THE POWER WORKERS WANT PAY RAISES, THE PORT WORKERS ARE PROTESTING THE TRANSFER OF BARGEMEN TO THE CATEGORY OF DOCK LABOR (PART OF THE PROGRAM BEGUN NEARLY A YEAR AGO TO RESTORE SOME SEMBLANCE OF EFFICIENCY TO THE PORT) AND SO ON. BUT IT IS HARD NOT TO SEE A LINK - CERTAINLY PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PERHAPS TO SOME EXTENT CONSPIRATORIAL - BETWEEN THE SUDDEN UPSURGE OF LABOR TROUBLE AND THE CURRENT PRESSURE BY THE CENTER AND LOCAL OPPOSITION PARTIES FOR DISSOLUTION OF THE STATE CONGRESS GOVERNMENT AND THE HOLDING OF LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. THE CPM IS INTENT ON EARLY ELECTIONS AND HAS BEEN HOLDING POLITICAL RALLIES ALMOST NIGHTLY THROUGHOUT THE CALCUTTA METROPOLITAN AREA; IT HAS A MASS RALLY SCHEDULED ON THE CALCUTTA MAIDAN (THE LARGE BRIGADE PARADE GROUND, NOT THE SMALLER SAHID MINAR) FOR APRIL 22. WHILE THE CPM LEADERSHIP CONTINUES TO CAUTION ITS TROOPS AGAINST VIOLENCE, RESTRAINTS ON LABOR AGITATION BY CPM UNIONS APPEAR TO BE OFF AND THIS OF COURSE OBLIGES THE CONGRESS, CPI AND OTHER UNIONS TO FOLLOW SUITE. THE OVERALL EFFECT, EITHER ACCIDENTAL OR INTENDED, IS TO CREATE THE

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IMPRESSION THAT SUDDARTHA RAY'S CONGRESS CABINET IS UNABLE TO GOVERN THE STATE.

4. POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE BEGUN GEARING UP FOR STATE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS WHICH MOST PEOPLE ASSUME WILL SOON BE CALLED AND ARE LIKELY TO BE HELD EARLY IN JUNE. THE CRUCIAL QUESTION WHERE IS WHETHER JANATA/CFD AND CPM WILL AGAIN REACH AN UNDERSTANDING ON DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS, AS THEY DID IN THE LOK SABHA ELECTIONS, AND IF SO HOW MANY SEATS WILL BE ALLOCATED TO THE CPM. THE GENERAL VIEW, NATURALLY STILL TENTATIVE AT THIS STAGE, IS THAT BARGAINING WILL BE HARD, AND THAT JANATA/CFD WILL TRY TO HOLD THE CPM'S SHARE OF SEATS DOWN TO 70 OR 90 AT THE MOST, BUT THAT THERE WILL BE AN AGREEMENT. NEITHER SIDE WANTS TO GO IT ALONE: THE CPM FEARS A PUBLIC BACKLASH AGAINST IT, GROWING OUT OF ANXIETY FED OF RECOLLECTIONS OF THE LATE SIXTIES AND EARLY SEVENTIES, IF IT RUNS WITHOUT JANATA/CFD; AND THE JANATA/CFD IS CONCERNED OVER ITS LACK OF ORGANIZATION IN THE STATE AND KNOWS IT NEEDS THE CPM.

5. THE OTHER QUESTION IS WHETHER THE STATE CONGRESS PARTY WILL HOLD TOGETHER WITH ONLY MINOR DEFECTIONS OR SHATTER. FROM WHAT WE HEAR, RIGHT NOW THE ONLY THING THAT SEEMS TO BE KEEPING THE WEST BENGAL CONGRESS TOGETHER IS THE REFUSAL OF STATE CFD AND JANATA LEADERS TO ACCEPT BIG NAME CONGRESS DEFECTORS. A LARGE PART OF THE WEST BENGAL CONGRESS WOULD BE QUITE HAPPY TO SEEK REFUGE UNDER THE CFD BANNER. THERE HAS BEEN SOME TALK OF THE POSSIBILITY OF A CONGRESS-JANATA/CFD ALLIANCE AGAINST THE CPM, BUT NOT MANY PEOPLE THINK THIS REALISTIC. FOR ALL THE MIDDLE AND LOWER MIDDLE CLASS PUBLIC'S FEAR OF THE CPM, THE WOUNDS OF THE EMERGENCY ARE STILL TOO FRESH FOR PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND AND SANCTION AT THE POLLS AN ELECTORAL ALLIANCE THAT WOULD LOOK VERY UNHOLY, AIMED SOLELY AT BLOCKING THE CPM. IF JANATA/CFD CAN'T REACH AGREEMENT WITH THE CPM ON DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE EVENT OF LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, THE LIKELY
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ALTERNATIVE SEEMS A THREE SIDED CONTEST, WITH JANATA/CFD, CONGRESS AND CPM RUNNING SPEARATELY.

6. WHILE THE OUTLOOK IS FOR MORE TURMOIL IN WEST BENGAL IN THE WEEKS AND MONTHS AHEAD, AT THIS TIME FEW PEOPLE ANTICIPATE THAT THINGS WILL GET OUT OF HAND. ONE OF THE STATE'S MAIN INDUSTRIALISTS, VIEDJIVERHICPWAGUCIA TOLD FBMLY OTHER EVENING THAT HE EXPECTED THE DISRUPTIONS TO COME WOULD BE MANAGEABLE AND THAT BUSINESS PROSPECTS THIS YEAR WOULD BE REASONABLY GOOD. STATE JANATA LEADER P.C. SEN ADDRESSED THE INDIAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ON APRIL 19 AND HAD SOME VERY ENCOURAGING THINGS TO SAY. KANORIA AND OTHER TOP EXECUTIVES CAME AWAY HEARTENED THAT A JANATA GOVERNMENT LED BY SEN WOULD BE GOOD FOR BUSINESS.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PROVINCE, LABOR RELATIONS, POLITICAL SITUATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 22-Apr-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977NEWDE05793
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770141-0872
Format: TEL
From: NEW DELHI
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770429/aaaaayni.tel
Line Count: 156
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 151d8ea0-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 02-Mar-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2722147
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: LABOR TURMOIL AND POLITICAL AGITATION IN WEST BENGAL
TAGS: ELAB, PINT, IN
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odhc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/151d8ea0-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009